



# Parco Archeologico Didattico del Livelet and its use of experimental archaeology

Maura Stefani

Archaeologist, educational operator and coordinator at Parco Archeologico didattico del Livelet.  
Comitato Provinciale UNPLI Treviso, Piazza Squillace 2, 31050, Miane (TV) Italy.  
didattica.stefani@parcolivelet.it

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## Abstract

Parco Archeologico didattico del Livelet is an Italian Open-Air Museum, inaugurated in 2007 and dedicated to a period between the end of the Neolithic and the beginning of the Bronze Age. The educational programmes are developed for schools, families and the general public and are mostly conducted by archaeologists. Each activity, from guided tours to workshops, is structured to encourage exchange between the museum, the staff and the participants, to convey correct content in an engaging way. In order to enhance the reconstructed pile-dwellings and the replicas on display, the organization uses in part experimental archaeology, while other methods fall within the sphere of ancient technology and interpretation.

## Keywords

Open-air museum, pile dwellings, replicas, experimental archaeology, dissemination.

## Resumen

El Parco Archeologico Didattico del Livelet es un museo italiano al aire libre inaugurado en 2007 y dedicado a un período comprendido entre el final del Neolítico y el comienzo de la Edad del Bronce. Los programas educativos se desarrollan para las escuelas, las familias y el público general, y en su mayoría son conducidos por arqueólogos. Todas las actividades que se realizan, desde visitas guiadas hasta talleres, tienen el objetivo de fomentar la comunicación entre el Museo, el personal y los participantes mediante la transmisión de los contenidos de forma correcta y atractiva. Con el fin de mejorar los palafitos reconstruidos y las réplicas en exhibición, la organización utiliza en parte la arqueología experimental, mientras que otros tipos de métodos caen dentro de la esfera de la interpretación de la tecnología antigua.

## Palabras clave

Museo al aire libre, palafitos, réplicas, arqueología experimental, difusión

## Resum

El Parco Archologico Didattico del Livelet és un museu italià a l'aire lliure inaugurat el 2007 i dedicat a un període comprès entre el final del neolític i el començament de l'edat del bronze. Els programes educatius es desenvolupen per a les escoles, les famílies i el públic general, i majoritàriament són conduïts per aqueolòlegs. Totes les activitats que es fan, des de visites guiades fins a tallers, tenen l'objectiu de fomentar la comunicació entre el Museu, el personal i els participants mitjançant la transmissió dels continguts de manera correcta i atractiva. Amb la finalitat de millorar els palafits reconstruïts i les repliques d'exhibició, l'organització utilitza en part l'arqueologia experimental, mentre

que altres tipus de mètodes cauen dins l'esfera de la interpretació de la tecnologia antiga.

**Paraules clau**

Museu a l'aire lliure, palafits, rèpliques, arqueologia experimental, difusió

## Introduction

Parco Archeologico didattico del Livelet is an Open-Air Museum based on the eastern shore of Lago lake, that together with the Santa Maria lake compose the complex Laghi della Vallata, in the municipality of Revine Lago, province of Treviso, Veneto Region. The area is located in a glacial valley at the foothills of the Pre-Alps (225m a.s.l.), surrounded by a rich natural environment, Site of Community Importance (S.I.C.) for Natura 2000 and included in the recent environmental park Parco dei Laghi della Vallata.

The structure was opened in May 2007, thanks to an agreement between the Province of Treviso, the Mountain Community of the Treviso Pre-Alps and the Municipality of Revine Lago. The aim was to enhance the nearby prehistoric site of Colmaggione di Tarzo, discovered in the isthmus between the two lakes (fig. 1). Since 2009, the structure has been managed by UNPLI Treviso, together with the Municipality of Revine Lago and the Consortium Pro Loco Quartier del Piave (Stefani/Munno 2019, 16; Modolo/Sartori/Stefani 2019, 47).

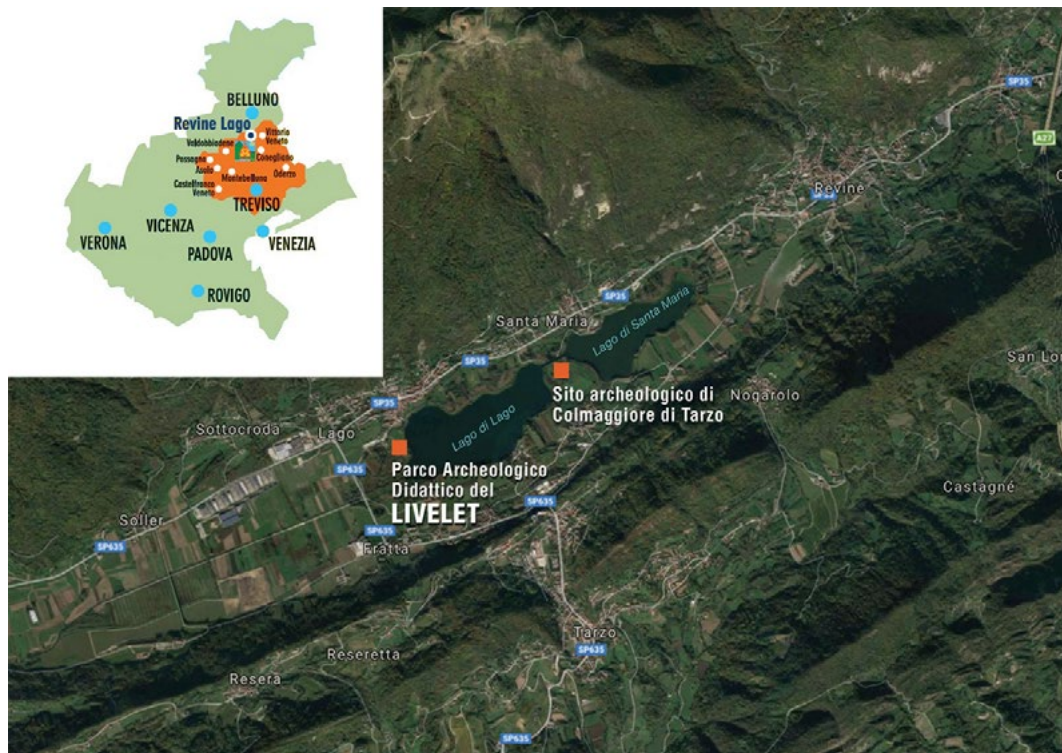


Fig. 1. Geographical location of Parco Archeologico didattico del Livelet and Colmaggione di Tarzo archaeological site.

Three full-scale pile-dwellings have been reconstructed at Livelet, based mainly on archaeological records. The permanent collection is composed only of reconstructions of tools and objects in use between the Neolithic and the Bronze Age in Northern Italy, providing an interpretation of how people lived and acted in the past and how they interacted with the lake environment. The activities for the public are characterized by a solid scientific content and designed for the education, but also the enjoyment, of the visitors.

This work has been produced for the “2<sup>nd</sup> Seminar on Experimental Archaeology, Fundamental Research and Applicability. Museums, universities, archaeological parks and educational centres, organized on 24 November 2020, by the Museu d’Arqueologia de Catalunya” and presents the sources that inspired the construction of the museum, how the didactic activities are structured and how experimental archaeology fits in their planning and implementation.

## The archaeological site of Colmaggio

Livelet was created to enhance the discovery of the important prehistoric settlement of Colmaggio di Tarzo. The first notable discovery in the area dates back to 1923 when a bronze Sauerbrunn-type sword was found during the excavation of an artificial canal connecting the two lake basins. In 1987 further excavations, conducted to extract peat, brought to light the first pile-dwelling remains, stones, bones, potteries and metals artefacts (Arnosti/Longo 1988, 3). Some local enthusiasts alerted the authorities for archaeological heritage of the Veneto Region that promoted a first survey in 1989, followed by two excavations in 1992 and 1997 and some publications. The result of the investigations has been the identification of a site dated back to between the end of Neolithic and the beginning of Bronze Age and also from the Middle and Recent Bronze Age (Bianchin Citton 1990, 215; 1993, 29–35; 2002, 27). The authorities finally placed an archaeological constraint in order to protect the area.

The collected remains, belonging to different material classes, helped to establish site chronology and to understand the daily life of human groups established in the area. Vertical piles, burnt wooden

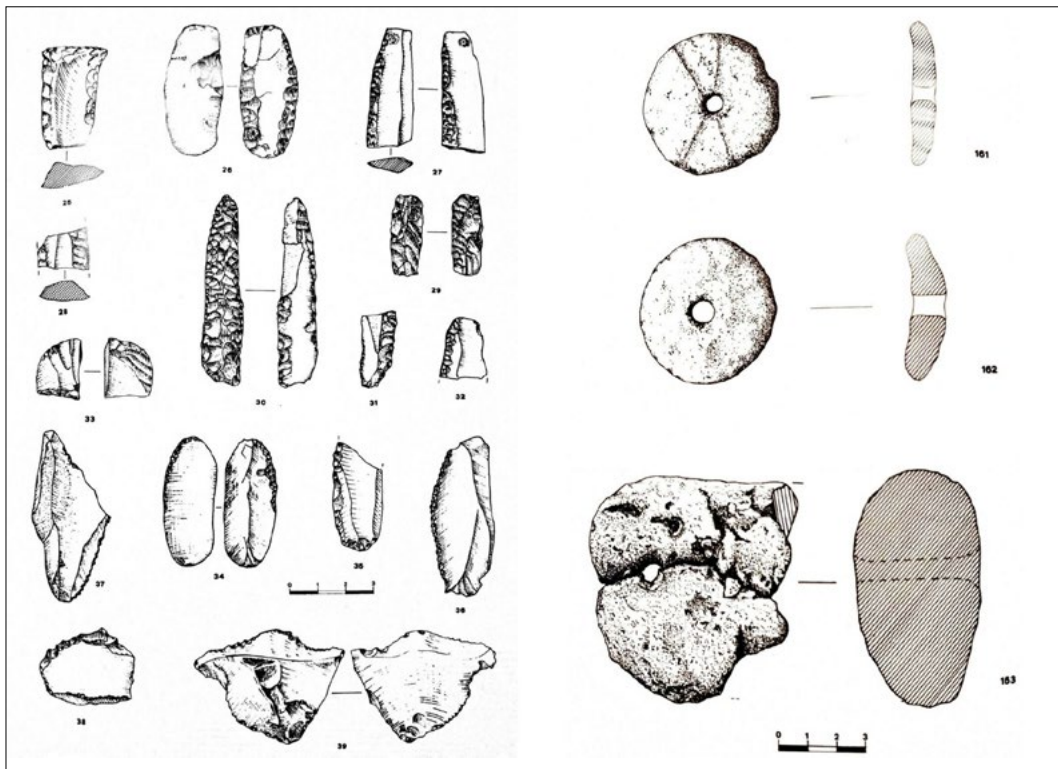


Fig. 2. Examples of lithic industry, two clay spindle whorls and a clay loom weight from the Colmaggio di Tarzo site (Arnosti/Longo, 1988, mod.).



fragments, plank floors and embankments have been recognized as signs of shore consolidations and remains of pile dwellings. The daily-use objects included flints, polished stones, bones and pottery fragments; the discovery of a spindle and a loom weight indirectly testifies the practice of weaving (fig. 2). The palaeobotanical and archaeozoological remains helped to reconstruct the diet and subsistence strategies and at the same time provided information about the environment, supposedly similar to the present. The economy was based on agriculture with cereal farming (documented by the discovery of sickle blades and fragments of millstones), and on the breeding of cattle, pigs, sheep and goats, as testified by the bone remains. Practices such as hunting, fishing and gathering represented an important resource, as confirmed by bones of hares (*Lepus europaeus*), red deer (*Cervus elaphus*), roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) and wild boars (*Sus scrofa*), shells of freshwater molluscs and fish bones, and the remains of wild fruits such as hazelnuts, acorns, water chestnuts and dogwood berries (Arnosti/Longo 1988, 5-8).

Part of the material is unfortunately without context because some areas were affected by uncontrolled peat extraction in the past, so the date has been estimated by studying the material culture. According to the pottery, settlement phases dated back to late the Neolithic, the Copper Age and beginning of the Bronze Age (end of 4th, beginnings of 2nd millennium B.C.). The discovery of two *Sauerbrunn* swords, dated to the middle Bronze Age (15th century B.C.) and a *Peschiera* dagger, dated to the late Bronze Age (13th century B.C.) suggest also a later frequentation, after the village was abandoned (Bianchin Citton 1990, 211-215; 1993, 28; 2002, 27).

## The reconstructions

The permanent collection of Livelet is composed totally of replicas, because the original finds are still under study.

Three main information sources used for the creation of the reconstructions: the Colmaggione di Tarzo site itself, other contemporary pile-dwelling sites of the alpine region, in particular, Fiafè - Carera (TN), 160 km away, where the use of wood has been specifically studied thanks to incredible conservation (Perini 1972, 1984, 1987; Bellintani/Silvestri/Franzoi 2014, 63-73), and ethnographic comparisons.

The open-air museum of Livelet is characterised by the reconstructions of three pile-dwellings, respectively dedicated to the Neolithic, Copper Age and early Bronze Age (fig. 3-5). The advantage offered by reconstructions is showing visitors houses and objects comparable to the original ones,



Fig. 3 - Pile dwellings and the lake environment.



Fig. 4. All the pile dwellings of Livelet.



Fig. 5. The pile dwelling half on the ground and half on the water.

made using techniques and materials available during prehistory and contextualized in a similar natural environment (Stefani/Munno 2019, 26; Modolo/Sartori/Stefani 2019, 49).

Only a few remains of huts were documented from the Colmaggiore di Tarzo site. Therefore, the reconstructions are based on the study of settlement-type recognized in other coeval sites of Northern Italy, where preservation conditions are better, as well as on ethnographical comparisons, in particular the famous “casoni” used by the fishermen in the high Adriatic coast (Tieto, 1979).

The three structures also represent three different types of prehistoric settlements used in humid environments and based on information provided by the well-preserved site of Fiaavè (TN). The first is a pile-dwelling completely built on dry land, another one is built half on land and half on water, and another one is supported by poles directly on the bottom of the lake (Perini 1972, 1984; Bellintani/Silvestri/Franzoi 2014, 32).

The village has been built for the most part with local wood, such as chestnut (*Castanea sativa*), oak (*Quercus sp.*), cornel (*Cornus mas*) and hazel (*Corylus avellana*) in order to guarantee a philological reconstruction. Wooden parts intended to remain immersed in the water were constructed in larch



Fig. 6. Inside the pile dwelling on the ground, dedicated to Neolithic period.

(*Larix decidua*), known for its resistance since Prehistory, but not available at the altitude where the site is located. This choice is a sort of compromise, in order to guarantee visitor safety, and to allow easier upkeep of the structures. Walls were created using reeds (*Phragmites sp.*), anchored to structural elements and then covered with a mixture of clay, straws and sand. The roof covers were obtained with a technique that uses overlying reed sets of about 30 cm, fixed to a wooden structure with ropes and weaves. In some strategic points, metal nails and iron rods have been inserted to ensure safety and durability. The reconstructions of furniture and tools were inspired by some archaeological finds from Colmaggio, but also by remains documented in other sites (VV. AA. 2018, 7–130), considered representative for the documented periods (Stefani/Munno 2019, 26) (fig. 6).

## The structure

Livelet is made up of an open-air museum area, with pile-dwelling reconstructions, and other areas with facilities for didactic activities and for the visitors.

The reconstructed village stands on the lake shore and it is located in a natural environment. Behind the village, there are several classrooms for didactic activities, a bookshop, a playground and a picnic area with tables and barbecue. A short route with panels dedicated to ecological aspects of the lake areas twists through the gardens. Some educational areas are open-air and used for workshops, while in an area that was dedicated to burials, two Bronze Age burial mounds were reconstructed to scale. Livelet is positioned along the figure-of-eight shaped path that allows visitors to walk along the banks of the lakes, within a natural park established a few years ago. The surrounding territory offers a lot from a naturalistic, historical but also enogastronomic and sporting point of view, and is growing thanks to the inclusion of the “Prosecco hills” in the UNESCO heritage list, in 2019.

## Activities

Livelet was created to disseminate archaeological and naturalistic topics for visitors and school groups. The pile-dwelling tours and naturalistic walks are always guided, and the workshops are always held by an educational operator. All activities are characterized by scientific content and spread with interaction and involvement, giving importance to a mutual exchange between staff and public and value to everyone's cultural baggage.

Teachers who choose Livelet as a destination for school trips can focus on an archaeological or a naturalistic itinerary or combine them in a personalized package. Proposals are designed for all school levels. During archaeological tours, students and teachers can visit the reconstructed pile-dwellings, accompanied by an archaeologist, and participate in imitative archaeology workshops. Practical activities are developed to explain, in a multisensory way, topics such as hunting, bread production, clay shaping, prehistoric art, weaving, netting, musical instruments, construction of huts or the job of the archaeologist. Classes who participate in naturalistic hikes, however, are accompanied by a qualified guide on an excursion along the lake shores and can carry out workshops dedicated to animals and plants that populate the environments observed in the field. Educational operators can also be called directly into classes to fulfil workshops dedicated to Prehistory, Great Civilizations and Nature. During opening days, visitors can take part in guided tours of the pile-dwelling village and in planned workshops dedicated to prehistory, archaeology or nature. Moreover, during the year Livelet organizes themed events, seminars, experimental archaeology demonstrations, hosts colleagues from other museums and promotes guided excursions. Groups can request in-depth thematic tours, while families can book a daily experience as pile-dwellings' inhabitants. The annual agenda also includes evening openings, conferences and workshops. During summer holidays, children can join a two or four-day camp, or participate in a two-week summer camp.

The aim of all the activities is always to stimulate curiosity, imagination and creativity and to transmit passion for history, the importance of memory and sensibility for naturalistic and archaeological heritage. Livelet deeply believes in virtuous exchanges and it is a member of the international EXARC network, the ICOM-affiliated organization for open-air museums, experimental archaeology, ancient technology and interpretation. During some annual events at Livelet it is easy to meet staff members from other



museums, institutions or associations, involved in educational activities and exchanges. For Livelet staff, contacts with other professionals and the possibility to work for a day inside a different structure produce a continuous flow of ideas and good practices, a form of updating and therefore an efficient training tool. At the same time, the park benefits from a constant renewal and enrichment of its offers, also encouraging visitors to return, as well as the possibility of self-promotion outside the usual area. For visitors, it becomes the opportunity to experience new activities and brand new topics and to know other local or distant realities (Modolo/Sartori/Stefani 2019, 52). Thus becoming a place of exchange between scientists, artisans, educators and artists, all the activity of the park acquires value, becoming a 360-degree place of culture (as also highlighted by Paardekooper 2012, 276-279).

## Turnout

Livelet has been open seasonally since 2007. From mid-February to mid-November, from Monday to Saturday, it can be reserved for school groups, to a maximum of 5 groups (17-30 students per group) per day. Opening time for the public is from April to October, on Sundays and holidays; the flow of visitors can change, depending on season and program, from 100 to 800 people per day.

During school summer holidays, the structure accepts bookings from other summer camp groups and organizes its own camp. With all these activities Parco Archeologico didattico del Livelet in 2019 had more than 20,000 visitors and every one of them was guided, therefore providing an exchange between public, staff and museum. It hosted over 12,000 students, over 6,600 visitors and attracted nearly 2,000 children with the summer activities.

In 2020, due to the pandemic still in progress, 92% of students and children from summer camps have been lost, but the number of Sunday visitors has been around 20% less than 2019, despite the park being open for 30% less than the usual annual calendar.

## The use of Experimental Archaeology at Livelet

The public is more and more used to learning about the past in an experiential way: the archaeological heritage is not only visible through a closed showcase, but there are numerous activities and places where it is possible to get in touch with the past in a multisensory way, such as the Open-Air Archaeological Museums.

Open-air museums are certainly privileged places to carry out activities of Experimental Archaeology, but on the other hand, not all the activities that take place there can be "labelled" with this definition (Paardekooper 2019, 1-22).

The term itself is constantly being redefined, since Graham, Heizer and Hester (1972) and Coles' early works (1979). In previous research conducted on this topic (Comis 2010; 2019; Paardekooper 2010; 2013; 2019; Reeves Flores/Paardekooper 2014; Godino/Lebole/Di Gangi 2020), which take into consideration the use of the term in the field of research, but also in tourism and education, an intricate tangle of meanings emerged. The confusion in many cases extends from the academic to the public, passing through those societies and freelancers who directly deal with the discipline. On the one hand, an attempt is made to define protocols and methods, on the other hand, the human potential (and variant) is claimed. Experimental Archaeology is a research tool but, as many recognize, it contains a great dissemination potential as it is immediate, multisensory, with a quick and easy understandable message, that makes it suitable for involving the public (Gaj 2005, 9; Paardekooper 2019, 8), so much so that many dissemination centres have "adopted" the term. But if nowadays the definition is still sometimes subject to negotiation, the advantage is the productive debate it has raised and the consequence of making the term much more inclusive than in the past. It is in its nature, as it is a dynamic discipline, and the context influences it a lot. According to Paardekooper (2019, 7) "the time when experimental archaeology was limited to purely scientific exercises with a clear hypothesis, workflow and results is gone". According to the author, at least two different contexts can be distinguished: the academic one, which requires a rigorous definition linked to research and education, and a sort of "applied" experimental archaeology, in the field of tourism, which also implies more than scientific value. As he had

also underlined in the past, this mixture must be considered an added value (Paardekooper 2010, 272), remembering that it is not only researching artefacts but finding out more about the people behind them (Paardekooper 2019, 2). In the academic field, a more scientific and research-focused approach prevails, underlining the fact that experiments are designed to test theories or interpretations about the past, separating archaeological experiments from education and experience (Reynolds 1999, 394; Mathieu 2002, 12; Outram 2008, 3), but also stating that it is possible to “combine a public accessibility with some form of research” (Hurcombe 2005, 83) or considering an opening to the story-telling (O’ Sullivan et al. 2014). EXARC presents it as an approach to fill the gaps in our knowledge of the past that could not be filled with other research methods or with the simple observation of artefacts, remembering that the activity of experimental archaeology must always answer a specific question of research, experimenting in practice hypotheses on how objects of the material culture of the past were produced and used. A fact in common with all the most recent definitions is that reference is always made to archaeological remains and the result of the experimentation is not a tangible product but the data collected during its development (Comis 2006; 2010; Paardekooper 2019, 7; Godino/Lebole/Di Gangi 2020).

As already pointed out, the permanent collection at Livelet is composed only of reconstructions<sup>1</sup>, not original finds, as the park was not created primarily for research purposes, but to support educational programs. However, the initial project provided areas for the development of experimental activities and the staff that manage the programs for the public and the maintenance are mostly made up of archaeologists. The public is involved in approaching the past in various ways and not all of them fall into Experimental Archaeology. For example, we practice what is called Ancient Technology (EXARC) or Archaeotechnique (Paardekooper 2019, 10) when we present the crafts and techniques of the past to the public without an experimental objective with the aim of producing tangible objects. This category includes all the demonstrations of ancient daily activities that we carry out for the public, involving the usual staff and their skills, or inviting external archaeotechnicians. Over the years the most successful have been the bronze casting, the clay pots firing, the loom weaving, the bow and arrow construction, the creation of chipped or polished stone instruments, the use of reconstructed musical instruments, basketry and netting. Occasionally workshops have been organized for staff or the public on topics like these and usually, they try to apply them in a simplified way in workshops for children, both during school trips and during visits with the family, bringing them closer to the past through an experience with raw materials and forgotten gestures (fig. 7). At Livelet, ancient technology has also been used for



Fig. 7 - Workshop with families (drilling steatite and beads production).



Fig. 8. A moment during a Live Interpretation.



the construction of the pile dwellings, with all their compromises, mostly due to building regulations, safety and maintenance. This is carefully explained to the public to help in the interpretation of what they are observing and touching. Also, most parts of the furnishings (tools, clothing etc.) are made with this approach. Instead, we apply interpretation (as defined by EXARC) in every activity we carry out with the public, putting exchanges first and involving every visitor: visits are always guided. We thrill and receive attention and connection from the audience, as the goal is to entertain and engage the audience as well as deliver content. We can include in this category all the panels, with archaeological and naturalistic content, guided tours to the pile dwellings and to the natural environment and "Living History days" in which we offer Live Interpretation (fig. 8), as defined by IMTAL Europe. This activity was tested both in role (First Person) or simply in costume (Third Person), in relation to the theme of the event or the staff involved; in some years it has been possible to invite external reenactors, in others the activity has been carried out by the internal staff.

At Livelet, the organization specifically uses Experimental Archaeology in some cases. For example, the reconstruction of a sword was recently commissioned starting from the original find kept in the Civic Museum of Conegliano, 10 kilometres away (one of the few original finds on display in a museum). In this case, we collaborated with a group of archaeotechnicians who carried out the reconstruction, contributing to their research on ancient weapons and moulds used for casting. In addition to a new object to be exhibited and a special event where the public was involved in the bronze casting, it has been possible to collect data and information that contribute to the research but which can be easily transmitted to the public as well (fig. 9). Although the tangible object is not the aim of Experimental Archaeology, it should be remembered that an experimental artefact in its physical dimension precisely represents a model useful for archaeological interpretation (Coles 1979). In the past, we practised experimental cereal farming, giving the public the idea of the seasonality of some activities carried out in prehistoric villages from the Neolithic onwards.

The results provided by Experimental Archaeology research conducted throughout Europe are also used as training for staff, who must always be updated, as a source for the production of new objects to display or in order to improve the quality of tours and workshops. The aim is to be able to respond to most of the visitors' curiosities, often focused on details, and provide information that may amaze them. In addition, the public may also include insiders or students of historical disciplines, who are looking for quality content.



Fig. 9 - Bronze casting (in collaboration with "Il tre di spade").

## Conclusions

Through its activities, Livelet involves its visitors, talking about Prehistory and Nature, but also broadens its subject matters thanks to several collaborations. Experimental archaeology and the data it offers is one of the bridges that allows the exchange of information, offering the public an experience. This discipline is nowadays considered by many to be a very powerful dissemination tool, capable of capturing a wide range of public audiences and making them interested in archaeological research. Experimental Archaeology is also the opportunity to cooperate with local, national or international networks, created over years, and the continuous exchange takes place both during the ordinary activities and during annual events between internal staff, the public and the occasional hosts. Somehow, exchange also takes place between past and present people: when knowledge and skills of ancient pile-dwelling inhabitants are communicated to the public, using also the data of experimental archaeology. The purpose of all these activities is to bring forward the knowledge of techniques that in the past were part of everyday life and could, in their application, also improve our lives in the future, making archaeology a discipline that can be useful for society and for sustainability. We hope in the future to become the scene of new experimental archaeology activities, perhaps counting on the support of the academic world, offering a context for the research and collection of data and “closing the circle” with their communication to the public.

## Notes

1. Also the term «reconstruction» has been questioned, but this is not the place to broaden the subject, see Stone/Planel 1999, 2.

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